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### Men and women more alike than you think

Since the cradle, we've been schooled in the ways of pink and blue. We are told that men are the solo, Rambo-style leaders, while women are the mother hens. Men compartmentalise while women multi-task. Boys are better at maths, girls at English. But what if this is all rubbish? What if we are expecting people to conform to stereotypes that have no basis in fact? Increasing numbers of researchers are stepping forward to tell us that most of what we thought we knew on the subject of gender is wrong.

Psychologist Cordelia Fine published *Delusions of Gender* last year, debunking the science that claims a "marinade" of testosterone in boy embryos at eight weeks' gestation makes male brains function substantially differently to female brains. It is not the functions of the brain that makes us conform to stereotypes, she says, but socialisation. "What the science of sex difference really tells us is this popular idea of a male brain hard wired to understand and change and advance the world, and a female brain hard wired to take care of those who do and iron their shirts, does not enjoy the scientific support we are often told it does," Fine said at The Festival of Dangerous Ideas in Sydney last year. "But it does have the psychological power to create self-fulfilling prophecies and hinder progress towards gender equality."

This month, Tricia Naddaff, president of the United States-based Management Research Group, visited Australia to present research on gender and leadership, commissioned by career coaching consultancy Directioneering. Looking at her database of the psychological profiles of nearly 900 Australian and New Zealand leaders, Naddaff finds "moderate" differences in behaviours of the genders but not necessarily the ones we would expect to see. One sex is more controlling and tends to "go it alone. The other is better at delegating and co-operating."

If you assumed the first pertains to men and the second to women leaders, you'd be wrong – it's the other way around. The research shows that in some instances, men and women in leadership swap stereotypes. Other differences supported by the research are that male leaders are more restrained and persuasive, and women show greater levels of excitement and are better at feedback, Naddaff says. "Men are not more aggressive but they are looking more reserved," she says.

One notable difference between the genders is that Australian women put more emphasis on getting things done: organising, communicating and getting results. Observers rated them as slightly more effective than the male leaders, possibly as a result of this can-do attitude. "As we go out and talk to women leaders and coaches, there's a very strong theme of women being tied to making sure the work gets done the right way," Naddaff says. "They are anxious about being too far away from where the work is getting done. They want to be close to the action. Men are more comfortable with being at a distance."

Naddaff speculates the reason for this could be that women with children are accustomed to making sure everything gets done at home and bring those tendencies into work. It would be interesting to see if the behaviour is as strong in women without children.

*creating career success*

“The biggest typical stereotype,” Naddaff says, “is that women lead as mothers and men lead as warriors, but our research contradicts that. “In some ways, women have almost more of the warrior emphasis than the men do because of the management focus on production and their ambitions around results.”

The vice-president of research for the Management Research Group, Rob Kabacoff, says there is a perception that men are more autocratic and less democratic but this too had not been borne out by the company’s research. It is hard to break away from pigeon-holing people according to their gender but, when it comes to stereotyping, it appears that bosses are the worst.

On the telephone from her office in Portland, Maine, Naddaff says direct reports are usually accurate when it comes to grading their boss’s effectiveness and behaviours. But the person their boss reports to is often blinded by a belief in stereotypes. “The bosses are incredibly gender-centric in how they view effectiveness,” she says.

Results from a study by Naddaff’s organisation finds bosses rate women leaders higher if they have more stereotypical female behaviours, such as nurturing. (They also tended to be biased towards young men.) Naddaff says she was surprised by the old-fashioned tendency to cling to a stereotype, but reasoned it was probably because bosses were older males out of step with the times. The differences between the genders are in the small-to-moderate range: “They are not the big headline Men Are From Mars and Women are From Venus ,” she says. However, Kabacoff says that even small differences can have ramifications. “The ability to sell an idea in an organisation or be strategic in an organisation is important, whether you are a man or a woman,” he says. “Even small differences can come into play in terms of success and your ability to be promoted.”

Naddaff says most of the conversations about gender-based abilities (such as women’s superiority at multi-tasking, or men’s spatial awareness) is inaccurate. “We talk about them as if they are somehow ingrained traits but both men and women are capable of developing the behaviours necessary for success,” she says. “There isn’t an inherent gene or gender flaw in either men or women.” Further, the Management Research Group’s studies show that when you look at the eight most important leadership practices for overall effectiveness (out of a total 22), there is no statistical difference between the performance of men and women. The same goes for the seven most important practices for future potential.

Naddaff says the findings of the gender in leadership research may not hold true for the general population. However, results such as these can be useful in busting preconceptions. This study shows that leaders, regardless of their sex, are more like each other than a group would be if randomly selected from the general population. “There is more homogeneity in this group of men and women than there would be in the general population. Most have uni degrees or higher, they own their own homes and they’ve been in an organisation for 10 years or more.”